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# Downtown St. Pete, where the pace slows to a shuffle

## Chester Smolski

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — This is an unusual city: all of the curbside parking in the downtown is free; they give away the evening paper if the sun doesn't shine; the National Shuffleboard Hall of Fame is located here; and more than one-half of the population is over 44 years of age.

The city administration has had an ambivalent attitude toward parking meters. Twice it installed them and twice it removed them. Although limited to use by time, there are more than 1,500 free curbside parking spaces in the downtown. Another 5,000 or more spaces exist in metered parking lots, reserved areas and garages.

*The Evening Independent* has distributed free its evening papers on just a few occasions each year over the past 63 years. The odds are definitely in their favor; on average, the sun shines here 361 days a year.

In this climate, outside activity is very common, and with the large number of older people in the community, the Mirror Lake Shuffleboard and Bridge Club claims to be the world's largest. The Shuffleboard Hall of Fame is located on their grounds.

Named by an early railroad magnate for his birthplace in Russia, St. Petersburg has long been a retirement haven for the elderly. "Wrinkle City" is a name that the city is trying to eliminate as it publicizes the advantages of its sun coast location in order to attract other groups of people and a broader employment base.

Situated in the peninsula part of Pinellas County, this city with three times the area of Providence has an ideal location with Tampa Bay to the east and the Gulf of Mexico to the west. The prevailing winds bring cooling breezes to the city for much of the year, though summer temperatures do reach into the 90s. The beaches on the

islands to the west are some of the best in all of Florida.

First settled in the 1840s, this sleepy town had only 1,600 residents at the turn of the century, but it jumped from 4,000 to 40,000 in the period from 1910 to 1930, and today numbers close to one-quarter million people. Recent estimates are that 3,500 new arrivals come to settle each year, and, in addition, thousands visit this strongly tourist-oriented community during the high season.

The American Medical Association stated that this was a healthy city in which to live, and in 1975 *The Christian Science Monitor* rated St. Pete as one of the ten most livable cities in this country. These pronouncements are further indications on the comfortable climate and the good overall living conditions.

St. Pete is an enjoyable tourist stop but more interesting is to see how the many elderly have influenced the community. We are an aging population in this country and one can speculate on what the future might be like in the many other of our communities which will have an increasing number of old people.

Approximately one in ten Americans today is 65 years of age and older. By the early part of the next century when the babies born in the boom years of 1947 through 1961 reach these age levels, the United States Census Bureau estimates one in six Americans will be elderly. We have had our baby boom, our youth cult, and now these young people are forming families and buying houses. This generation of Americans has had a tremendous economic impact in our nation with selected goods and services directed toward this market. So what will it be like when they get old?

We are told that to be old is to be helpless, lonesome, sickly and dependent. But in St. Pete, old is also enjoyment; here an elderly citizen does not have to make excuses for shuffling feet, for being unable to hear or see well, or for having limited

funds, because he or she is surrounded by many others with similar problems.

Observing these elderly, one also becomes aware that old age brings wisdom, experience, and character, and represents the culmination of work in mines, factories, offices and on farms which has made this country great. Old age should also bring gratitude.

Finally, one should note that old age will apply to more and more people who, once they organize (and they will) will represent a potential political force that can exert pressure to enact legislation favorable to this group.

In this city where 28 percent of the population is 65 and older, one eats at that common restaurant type in the South, the cafeteria. Here one finds that evening entertainment means a guitarist singing such pop tunes as "Danny Boy" and "Over There," with the patrons singing along and clapping their hands. By seven in the evening when the sing-along is ended, the streets of the downtown are deserted. Old age fears crime.

Downtown St. Pete is geared to the elderly: the clothes in the downtown shops and their staffs; the restaurants; the sidewalk benches; the slow-paced traffic; the shuffleboard and lawn-bowling courts; and the newly opened Sunshine Center providing multi-services to the elderly (six months after opening it has 6,000 members). The nearby shopping malls, by contrast, are oriented toward younger and family-type shoppers.

St. Petersburg's orientation to the elderly is well beyond that of most cities, yet it may portend the character, activities and direction of all communities which will have increasing numbers of older Americans. We might do well to look at this community to determine how it is dealing with this large and expanding age group to ascertain what we can learn in preparing for the time when there will be many more St. Pete's in this nation.

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Chester E. Smolski, Director of Urban Studies at Rhode Island College, is touring several southern cities.